

## A Leader Falls

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Category: Newsies  
Language: English  
Status: In-Progress  
Published: 1999-09-10 09:00:00  
Updated: 1999-09-10 09:00:00  
Packaged: 2016-04-27 10:21:57  
Rating: K+  
Chapters: 1  
Words: 3,615  
Publisher: [www.fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net)  
Summary: 1900 - a girl learns hard realities of life and death with help of newsies

## A Leader Falls

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\*~A Leader Falls~\*

I slept in. Again. I awoke to the shouts of the newsies selling papers below my small Manhattan apartment shared with my 2 sisters. I jumped up from bed and immediately hit my head quite hard against the low, sloping section of the ceiling, located conveniently above my bed. I was up and dressed in 4 minutes and before I rushed downstairs had time to glance in the mirror to see my face(which\_ I\_ think leaves something to be desired) accentuated by an ugly red welt on my forehead from my abrupt waking. \_Another beautiful morning\_ I thought sarcastically as I walked outside. But wait! Ohhh, my heart skipped a beat. Alas, the morning \_was\_ beautiful, I saw the most gorgeous newsie in New York City, Mush.

He was talking to his friend Kid Blink while he absentmindedly played with the corners of his papers. What a glorious smile. He looked up.

" Hey!" he said good naturedly. I turn from him quickly and walk the other direction so he didn't see me blushing. " Hey Jen! Wait up!" he called again. I slowly turned around, seconds before I remember my forehead. I quickly covered my bruise with my hand. He trotted up beside me and said. "What's the rush, Jen?"

"I, uh, was going to go buy a newspaper," I said quickly, not realizing my stupid mistake.

He smiled at me knowingly, and before I melted said, "You didn't happen to hit your head again, did you?" He brought down my hand and examined my bruise. "Eh, not as bad as last time," He liked to tease

me about me and my rising mishaps.

"Well, as long as you're bothering me, I'll take one paper. Please." I added. He smiled again and handed me a paper as I handed him his penny. "Well," he said brightly, " gotta carry the banner!" He waved and started away. I'm going to do it I thought. I'll tell him how I feel.

" Mush!"

He turned around quickly, maybe too quickly, and I chickened out.

"Thanks." I said weakly. He looked at me oddly, but smiled and walked off. I went inside and collapsed on my bed.

"I'll tell him tomorrow," I said aloud.

"You'll never tell him!" my older sister Lianne pointed out from across the room as she folded her laundry.

Startled, I sat up quickly, hitting my forehead against the ceiling once more. I carefully got out of harm's way and went to work with thoughts of Mush in my throbbing head.

~\*~

"Jen, get me a nudda' piece a pie, will ya'?" Jack Kelly asked me from inside Tibby's, the restaurant where I worked.

"Sure Jack." I said in a totally fake happy-waitress voice. He loved to give me a hard time about my job. He knew I hated it and wanted something fulfilling to do. Jack was one of my best friends. He didn't care if I was of the supposedly incompetent gender. We got along well. Through him I had gotten to know all of the newsies, not to mention getting to be really good friends with Mush, also. My shift was over in an hour and then I could go and spend time with them. I couldn't wait.

Jack , Mush, and I had been walking along the alley by the newsie's lodging house. Jack decided he had to call it a night (he knew how I felt about Mush and wanted us to be alone). I could have soaked him for that. We walked down town awhile and talked about all sorts of things. I sat down and leaned against the building on my right.

"Jen?" Mush asked softly.

"Yeah?" I said, pretending I couldn't feel my heart pounding in my chest.

"I, uh, well I was wondering if you would, uh.." he hesitated.

"Yes?" I asked curiously.

His expression changed and he said, " I met this goil last night. I really like'er a lot an' I don't know how to tell her." He looked satisfied for a moment then looked nervously at me. I couldn't speak. Now I knew why they called it a crush.

My emotions drained from me as I said, " Just be honest with her, Mush. All you have to do is tell her how you feel."

"Really? Just tell her? Nothin' special or anythin'?" he asked with a little more confidence. Anything you say is special, I thought sadly.

He gave me his hands in a gesture to help me up. I took them and stood up quickly. I wanted to go home and cry my eyes out. I started to turn when his hand grasped mine.

"Jen, I.. I didn't meet anyone. I was just, uh.. trying to tell you how I feel about you," he said as he looked deep into my eyes. "Do you, I.. I mean would you, uh, consider being my girlfriend?" he asked me sweetly.

I about died right there.

My eyes must have been popping out of my head when I said, "I do, oh, I mean I would."

We both laughed. He touched my cheek with his hand and leaned in to kiss me.

Just as his lips touched mine, a voice called out, " Well if it ain't a coupl'a love boids!"

I'm going to get you back, Jack Kelly , I thought . Interrupting a perfect moment. Mush walked me back to the apartment holding my hand. I fell sound asleep, woke up on time the next morning, and didn't hit my head.

~\*~

The week passed without incident. Mush and I spent more time together and some of his friends started suspecting us, Blink in particular, he always did have that flare for other people's business. Mush tried to act all blasÃ© about it. He was always the most sensitive of the newsies, a quality I loved, and he tried to act manly in front of the other newsies. I didn't mind. I understood how he felt, he always explained everything to me. Then one day, there was trouble with a capital D ,if ya know what I meanâ€|

"Heya Cowboy! How's da gimp?" called Morris Delancy, one of the infamous Delancy Brothers. Jack turned around slowly.

"Why if it ain't Morris Delancy. Crutchy's fine, no 'tanks ta you an' yer lousy brudder." Crutchy had had another unfortunate run-in with the Delancys while in Central Park.

"Who you callin' lousy?" another voice broke in.

"Ah, now da duo's complete." Jack told them "haven't seen ya 'round da distribution centah lately, Oscar, didja get fired or somethin'?" Jack asked, mocking them for being thrown out after the strike.

"Dat's it Cowboy, I'm gonna-"

"What? Tell Uncle Weasel on me?" he said, his voice mimicking the two others.

"Dat's it Cowboy, we're gonna really soak ya now."

"Look at me, I'm tremblin'!"

They charged at him simultaneously and knocked him to the ground. He quickly threw them off of him and got up. He touched his lip, a trickle of blood crept out of the corner of his mouth. He muttered something about Crutchy under his breath and jumped into the fight. They rumbled for about half an hour before the Delancys decided (more like Jack decided for them) that they had had enough for one evening. They got up and ran like the coward rats they were. Jack leaned against a building long enough to erase the dizziness spinning his head around. His arms were a mass of bruises and his left arm was bleeding profusely. He slowly walked out of the alley and into the moonlight. He started walking, not knowing where he would end up.

~\*~

The loud knocking on the door startled me as I prepared my bed. My sisters were out of town for two weeks visiting my relatives, and I wasn't expecting anyone. I quickly walked to the door and opened it just a crack, but the weight leaning against it forced it open. A heavy form fell against me, and I stumbled back, but caught myself in time.

"Jack? What's wrong?" I asked, trying to hold him upright. He mumbled something I couldn't understand. I sat him down on my bed.

"Jack, what happened? Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, jest had a little run-in wit' some people, dats all."

"The Delancys?"

>He nodded solemnly. <p>

"Figures. Ok, here, take your coat off."

I slipped his coat off and noticed that his arm was soaked in blood.

"Jack! You're bleeding!"

"Yeah, it's nothin' bad. Jest a scratch." He continued to deny being hurt while I took his shirt off and bandaged his arm with the kit we kept in case of emergencies. "Jack?" I asked him as he started to doze off on the bed. I had made him comfortable and told him to just stay here tonight.

"Hmm?"

"I want you to promise me you won't fight them any more, all right?"  
"Jack? Are you listening to me?"

"Yeah, yeah. Whaddya want?"

"Promise me you won't fight the Delancys anymore. Just walk away. All right?"

"Jen, ya know I can't promise ya that, what if dey jump me or da guys? I'se gotta fight."

"Jack, I don't want you getting hurt. Please." He looked at me, and must have noticed the desperation in my voice.

"Jen, whatsamatta?"

"It's just, well, my brother was in a fight when-" my voice broke.

"Oh, sorry. Yeah, I remember." He paused and looked at me, concerned. "I promise," he said as he squeezed my hand. "G'night Jen."

"Night, Cowboy." I said, finally content.

~\*~

"WhoooooHooooo! Medda!" Race shouted as the curtains closed after another dazzling performance.

As the newsies walked back to the Lodging House, they started to talk about Mush, and his growing interest in Jen.

"So Mush," Race said innocently, "What were ya doin' wit' Jen last night aftah dark?"

Mush put his head down and shook it, though he was blushing from the remark.

"Yeah, I hoid dey were holdin' hands on da bridge again!" Blink added playfully.

"We wasn't doin' nuttin'! Jest talkin', dat's all!" Mush said, embarrassed.

Seeing his troubled friend, Jack stepped in. "All right, all right, dat's enough. Ya know, Blink," he said, gesturing towards the grinning boy, "I wouldn't be spreadin' no rumors 'bout Mush when I could tell 'em all what I hoid 'bout you and da Mayor's daughtah!"

All of the boys laughed at this, except Blink, who was now blushing himself. Mush looked at Jack, graciously with admiration, and was given a wink and a quick smile in return.

When all the other newsies had fallen asleep, with the usual exception of Race, Jack, and Snipeshooter, Mush lingered awkwardly in the washroom as Jack washed his face and hands, preparing for bed.

"What's on ya mind, Mush?" Jack asked, noticing his demeanor.

"Aww, nothin'. I jest wanted ta say thanks fer..fer stickin' up fer me back theah. I nevah really..well, been good at dealin' wit' datâ€¦" he trailed off, realizing he didn't know what to say to his friend.

Jack came up to him and put an arm around his shoulders saying, "No problem, Mush. Dat's what I'm heah for, ain't it?" He smiled. "Now you take good care of Jen, ya hear?"

Mush grinned and nodded, "Shoah, Cowboy. 'Night."

As he lay in his bed he thought of Jen, the newsies, Jack's leadership and began to doze off, willing a new day to begin.

~\*~

Josh died two years ago on a crisp fall day. I can't remember much about it, maybe I don't want to. All I know is that he was on his way to the factory when he got into a fight. I don't even know who he was fighting with, but he died that day. There in the street, helpless. Sometimes I walked along with him, not old enough by my sister's standard to work yet. He would tell me stories of our parents, or far-away lands and magical places. I loved my brother. I shudder to think what would have happened had I gone with him that day. But maybe, just maybe, I could have stopped it. Saved him. When he died, all I could feel was a deep sense of loss and a terrible, overwhelming fear for those I held dear. I couldn't bear to think of what I would do if I was left, alone. I hated to walk alone in the streets, and I suppose my friends know that. Mush and Jack especially. I still believe that somehow, however distant and impossible, it was\_ my\_ fault.

Every day is farther away from the past, and I am growing. I have a new life, new friends, a new hope. As I walk along the narrow, dark cobblestone streets with Jack, I worry that I'll forget what Josh looked like. How he sounded. And what about me? When I'm gone, who will remember? We were leaving Brooklyn after having visited Spot, the leader of the Brooklyn newsies, but my thoughts were far away, with my heart.

"Hey, Jen," Jack said as he placed something in my hand.

I held it up to the moonlight; it was a shiny new penny, dated 1900. I gave him a quizzical look.

"For ya thoughts," he said, smiling. He was a good friend.

I smiled back and looked up, about to say something when I noticed his expression had changed. Into fear.

"Jen, get outta heah!" he whispered. I was confused. Why?

My question was answered as two forms stumbled out of the shadows. Oscar and Morris Delancy had stepped in our path, drunk, beady eyes gleaming in the moonlight. My heart began to race. I felt dizzy.

"Jack?" I started, afraid.

"Jen, go back ta Brooklyn, get Spot," he commanded. I shook my head. "Jest go!" he shouted, obviously worried.

"C'mon, Cowboy! Let's have it out..unless ya want ta let us entertain

yer girl heah!" Oscar said, his voice slurred and thick.

Jack started, fury in his eyes.

"Please, Jack, don't fight them. Just come with me!" I pleaded, taking his hand.

"Jest go, Jen. I'll take care a' dis."

"No! Jack," I said, desperate now, "you promised me!"

He turned to me, and his eyes were far away. He glanced back at the Delancys, debating. Finally, with resignation, he turned to me.

"Let's go, Jen."

I sighed in relief, and smiled. Everything was going to be fine. Just then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a glimpse of steel flashing in the moonlight. Morris was running towards me at full speed, knife in hand. I froze. Jack saw my expression and looked back.

"Jen! NO!!!" he screamed as Morris was about to slam into me.

He swiftly jumped in front of me, falling to the ground with Morris in a ball of fists and kicks.

"Jack! No, don-" I was cut off as a hand pulled across my face, cutting off my air and slamming my head hard into the brick wall of the building next to me. I remember thinking of Josh. Then of Jack. Then of nothing at all.

~\*~

A hand was holding mine, the other stroking my cheek absently. My eyelids were heavy, and lifting them sent bolts of light and pain to my aching head. The room was tilted and voices were swimming in and out.

"Mush, whatâ€|where am I?" I asked, wondering if the words had actually come out.

"Jen?" he asked, startled to see my eyes searching his. "How ya feelin'?"

"Like I hit my head on the ceiling again. Over..and over.."

He smiled a weak smile. There was a sadness I couldn't place. Suddenly reality hit me.

"Jack! Where is he?" I said, struggling to sit up. My head throbbed painfully.

"Jen..somethingâ€|somethin' bad happened last night," he said somberly, looking deeply into my eyes.

"No.." I said, blinking back tears. "Is he..is he going to be okay?"

He shook his head, "No..he got hoit real bad, theah was a knife

an'..the doc said dat 'e pro'lly wouldn't make it through da night..dat he.." His voice broke. His eyes were wet.

"It was the Delancys! I was there, too! They were drunk andâ€¦" I couldn't continue.

"Don'tcha worry, Jen. Dey aren't gonna be around heah no more. They ain't even in the refuge. Denton got 'em sent to the state pen," Mush said, anger in his eyes.

I couldn't stop thinking of Jack and what he did for me.

"Can I see him?" I asked softly.

He nodded and steadied me as I tried to stand. We were in some kind of infirmary. The cold, hard floor was unnoticed by my bare feet. I was numb all over. I wanted to lay down and sob. Die. It was all my fault. It was all I could think of as I sat down next to Jack.

"Hey, Jen," he said, his voice so weak and small that I didn't recognize it.

He was propped up in a sitting position on a bed; he looked normal, but as he turned to cough I could see how pale and translucent his skin was in the early morning light that filtered through the curtains. Dark rings hung under his warm, distant eyes.

"Kellyâ€¦I didn't.." I choked back sobs as he took my shaking hand in his own.

"I'm sorry Iâ€¦I couldn't keep my promise."

"Oh, Jack..it doesn't matter..I just..thank you," I said softly, "for saving me, Jack. Iâ€¦never tell you how much I.."

I couldn't finish. A thin trail of blood was creeping out of the side of his mouth. It was so vividly red on his white skin. I let the hot tears stream down my face as I watched him.

"Mush," he said, beckoning with his eyes, "c'mere."

"Yeah, Cowboy?" he asked softly kneeling next to the bed.

He slowly took Mush's hand in his other and laid his head back against the pillows, saying, "Mush, Jen..I want you two ta take ovah fer me, ta be theah for da guys.."

"No- Jack you'll..you'll be fine. Please!" I said softly, but with desperate urgency.

"Jen..please..promise me?" he asked, the corners of his mouth flicking up in a small smile.

I nodded, not willing to let him go. Jack slowly and carefully pushed Mush's hand against mine. He closed his eyes and shuddered. He winced in pain as he tried to lay down. Mush quickly helped him get comfortable.

"Jen, talk ta me..hold me hand," he said quietly, fear in his voice.



"Shh, Jack. It's all right," I said soothingly, taking his hand and squeezing it tight.

"It hurts, Jen..I can't..jest talk ta me.." he said softly, his voice far away.

"Think of something good, Kelly. Something warm and good," I said, crying harder now. "You're in Santa Fe, and it's a beautiful day," I started.

"In Santa Fe..an' I'm wit' all me friends.." he continued, the blood coming faster now in a steady stream. I wiped it away with his bandana. "I'm sittin' under a tree in th' sun..an'..an' it's \_so\_ beautiful" and Jen is theah," he said. He smiled softly under his own tears and squeezed my hand gently before it went limp.

"No! Jack..please!" I sobbed, but it was already over.

Mush took my hands and embraced me as we cried together. He \_was\_ in Santa Fe. I knew it.

~\*~

A week later, after everything was over, the crying, the hugging, the remembering, an old routine somehow worked it's way back into our lives. It would never be the same without Jack, but somehow, everything would be okay.

"Hey there," I said to the little boy who had stepped inside the Lodging House doors. After Jack's death, Kloppman had given me his job, something I actually enjoyed. I finally got to make a difference in the lives of the people I love.

"Uh, hey. I wanna be a newsie..they, they tell me that dis is da place to go?" the boy said, a little confused, a little frightened.

"Yep, this is the place. My name's Jen," I said as I began to show him around.

"Hey," Mush said as he came in to the room, "Who's dis?"

The little boy introduced himself and Mush started to walk with him out of the room. I sat down on a bunk and smiled as I heard Mush talk to the young boy.

"Headlines don't sell papes," he said in a friendly, commanding voice that I'd heard someone else use before. "Newsies sell papes."

And I smiled as they left the room, for I now knew that I would never be alone. Jack was always there, and Mush would be, too. I couldn't help but notice that Mush had moved his belongings to a new bunk. It was Jack's old one. I smiled again and fingered the shiny penny that I wore on a fine chain around my neck.

\*~End~\*

End

file.